

Inaugural lecture

By

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'Borrowed/Begged water never quenches thirst'¹

Abstract

This theme stems from a Setswana idiom that 'Mpempmhe o a lapisa motho o kgonwa ke sa gagwe'. For many years Africa has been viewed as a continent which is unable to determine its own theories and philosophies. However, this is not accurate because people have for centuries been able to mould their societies from their context, traditions as well as experiences, and were able to determine their direction by means of their history which during the period of colonialism was uncompromisingly taken away without any consideration. In this lecture the following are the areas which I shall focus on: identity, Motho o kgonwa ka sa gagwe (consciousness), suggestions and conclusion.

1. Introduction

I struggled to come up with the theme for tonight's lecture and ended up thinking about something which has always been a challenge, which I suppose is not only affecting me but almost everyone of us here hence the theme 'Borrowed or begged water never quenches thirst', otherwise understood in Setswana as 'Mpempmhe o a lapisa motho o kgonwa ke sa gagwe'. This theme may, to some people, be confusing, but I intend to show just how through history Africans found themselves in a situation where they could not determine their own destiny, not even to affirm who they are and what they want in life, while at the same time they carry baggage from their past of which they cannot get rid. All these consequences were not because they were unable to pave their way but they were never afforded the space to do so.

¹ For a lack of a proper translation the topic for this lecture was taken from the Setswana idiom that is: Mpempmhe o a lapisa motho o kgonwa ke sa gagwe.

Recently an increasing number of scholars and academics from the African context have emerged as the driving force behind affirming who and what Africans want for themselves and not that which has been forced upon them by external forces. My focus as I indicated earlier is placed on the following subtopics: identity, motho o kgona ka sa gagwe (consciousness), suggestions and conclusion.

2. Identity

Many people define the term identity in different ways but it is widely used to describe phenomena in various situations such as multiculturalism, civil rights movements, women's movements, lesbian and gay movements, separatist movements as well as violent ethnic and nationalist conflict in post colonial Africa.

While found within the political context, identity lies in the competing theoretical ways to understand the relationship between experience, culture, identity politics and power.

From the psychological perspective the notion of identity is an individual's self definition from a social context which can be viewed in terms of social identity. The current understanding of society influences how individuals strive to achieve a satisfactory concept or self image of themselves (Tajfel quoted from Postmes & Brascombe 2010: 119). However, the social categorisation has been used by human beings to either systematize or simplify their environment. Irrespective of this, people have carried with themselves their identity based on categorisation without considering their limitations. Social identity is understood as part of an individual's self-concept deriving from the knowledge of one's membership of a social group. This may mean that identity is a system of orientation which helps to create an individual's place in society. Tajfel alludes to this (quoted from Postmes & Brascombe 2010:119): 'Every society contains a repertoire of identities that is part of the objective knowledge of its members'. In short society does not only define but also creates psychological reality. As the individual realizes herself in a society and

recognises her identity in a socially defined terms, these become a reality as people live in that society. Finally there is no group that lives alone in a society, in other words positive aspects of social identity, attributes and engagement in social action can only acquire meaning in relation to, or in comparison with other groups.

3. Motho o kgona ka sa gagwe (consciousness)

Having spoken about identity, it is important to talk about South African and African historiography in this lecture tonight. I want to consider the South African historiography together with the collective consciousness of history. And look to what in Samir Amin's words is a global history, with the view from the context of the south. In other words this is doing history through the lenses or epistemology of the former colonised or colonial countries. After teaching Church History for twelve years in a tertiary institution, I have become aware of increasing consciousness in world history. Great historical movements have to a large degree been influenced by consciousness. Having read the available material written by history scholars, I am certain that South African historiography needs a new look of which young South Africans will be proud. A history which will give any South African the identity with which she or he has been battling over the years. For one to be part of this history, it is important to first be conscious of the direction the individual wants to take. Many societies around the world have traced their history from ancient times and later embrace it as the foundation of their development which ultimately determines their socio, political, religious and economic destinies. Those who have obtained knowledge regarding European history will know how the 14th century European Renaissance came about as it was a stepping stone to self discovery. Some examples of these societies include Italy, England, France, Germany and Portugal as they traced their origin from the Graeco Roman world. Hoskins (quoted from de Groot 2009: 63) believes that there are particular themes which the local historians should pursue or unconsciously reveal: the origin and growth of his or her particular community or society; records about the ownership and occupation of the land; population changes over a long period of time as well as the way the local community or society has disintegrated over a century or beyond. Meanwhile Finberg (quoted from de Groot 2009: 63) takes this argument further to say that a

historian's business is to re-enact his or her mind and to portray, to readers, the origin, growth, decline and the fall of the community. The sense of decline has in many instances overridden the history of many communities in such a way that the affected have become 'hollow shells from which the heart and spirit have been eaten away from the acids of modernity'. Community history complements history of communities from below and models social history while at crucial times it provides a model in which the same history is disconnected locally and universally. The emphasis should therefore be 'no historian ought to be afraid to get her or his feet wet' (de Groot 2009: 63). It becomes imperative that in writing the history of our communities and societies we need to go deeper and not shy away from the successes and embarrassing moments that we experienced as these form part of our past realities.

Africans (especially South Africans in this context) have grappled with the reality of who they are as they have for a long time been defined by others. The other will in this manner refer to races that dominated Africans during the colonial era and sometimes even in the contemporary Africa. They have known themselves to be not only black but also lesser human beings than other races. It took many generations of South Africans since colonialism and apartheid to come to terms with their identity as Africans because they did not define themselves. Many people (including myself) have read numerous books in which we tried to understand their content and in some cases even memorized words and phrases which sounded good to our ears. The material I am referring to now dates back to the 1950s'and 60s'.

Ecclesiastical history, the discipline I specialize in, was introduced to me chronologically in the following manner: Early Church History, Medieval History, Reformation History, and European History (Modern and Post Modern); the last section was African History. Unquestionably this sequence was accepted as the right approach to history. Yet at the same time it also never occurred to the minds of many to interrogate it. Possibly the fact that some of those scholars had studied in foreign countries so extensively meant that they forgot to question the chronological approach to history in schools. For me where you begin and end matters a lot; it also

greatly matters which the optional and compulsory sections are as students are quick to identify what is important and which is not. At that moment, it did not occur to me (and surely to many of us here tonight), as students, that foreign ideas were being inculcated in our minds even before we became aware of our identity... as Africans. We were taught only to understand and know about the kings, queens and outstanding leaders and figures from Europe; little or nothing about the kings and queens of Africa. Education was about understanding and memorising the European ideas as well as being able to reproduce them as we were required to.

The first outstanding figures in South Africa who advocated the concept of consciousness was Tiyo Soga, but this concept was made powerful in the political arena by Steve Biko when he spoke about Black Consciousness. It is also interesting to note that while the mainline churches such the Methodist, Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian and others did not repudiate the ideas of consciousness neither did they engage them. In the same breath these churches regarded movers of consciousness as less political figures, and the movements were seen as passing phases by some people who had not been initiated into them. It is difficult to write the history of groups without knowing their backgrounds. This situation can only mean that even God to an African will remain foreign if we are not conscious of who we are. In Tiyo Soga's words, 'the missionary canon of the Western European Christian morality condemned Black Society as barbaric and unacceptable' (Williams 1978: 80). In essence the missionaries wrongly conceived the African culture and stood against it in many aspects. Some of these aspects were associated with religion and were regarded as bulwarks against the progress of Christianity since they kept Africans in 'a space of ignorance based on superstitious rights' (Williams 1978: 80). There was little attempt to understand the social importance of the features of the African life and their value for society.

Many church ministers' libraries have their shelves filled with books not authored by African scholars, while some may in their entirety not even possess a single book by any African scholar, even in a context that calls for the rebirth of the continent. Many of the studies on liturgies, doctrines and history are on missionaries and missionary

churches, with very little or nothing on the continent of Africa and its people. This points to the limited education that we have received over decades of learning.

Raising consciousness is a phenomenon that is not outdated. It is a phenomenon that must always be present in our teaching while at the same time it is important to note that human consciousness is not only confined to black consciousness. The most important questions one must ask is: what does it take to be human in the 21st century? Where and how do we fit in world history? It is therefore imperative to talk consciousness in such history. It is impossible to meaningfully contribute to world history when one's identity is unknown or unclarified. Consciousness in a collective manner means global analysis of events, movements and activities. It is a phenomenon which should invariably open one's mind about his or her environment. In other words people must be able to redefine their own environment and not allow others to do it for them. Oduyoye (2011: unpublished lecture) clearly points out that we should be able to seriously study and understand our own situation and not react to what we have been through by putting the blame on others. In her words the agenda must be based on inculcating a readiness to get rid of the tendency of blaming others and the past. We need to be ready to empower the aspect of our lives and experiences to bring about the dignified ethos we seek for ourselves. In short this poses a challenge to the historians to stop accepting the way we write history, especially as regards the hegemonic influence of the west.

Opoku (2011, unpublished lecture) argues that the tendency to put others down in order to situate one's position or viewpoint as absolute or pre-eminent is wisely countered by African wisdom in the Swahili proverb: "It is not necessary to blow out the other person's lantern to let yours shine". This suggests that we are all lanterns and our African history constitutes them. The reality is simply that an attempt to extinguish the African lantern was made by missionaries who believed that they were in possession of the absolute truth. Their confidence was based on the grounds that theirs was a divinely-appointed mission: equipped to the hilt with deep and profound ignorance, erroneous conceit and thundering contempt, they set out to douse the African lantern by converting people without knowing what they were converting

them from (Opoku 1978:2). One cannot help but give examples of people like Robert Moffat, David Livingstone, William Shaw and many others who wrote history for Africans without allowing them space to participate. Africa was destined to become extinct with only one option for her to choose from: namely Western civilisation. In essence the knowledge over which the dominant claimed to have a monopoly had blinded them from seeing the historical reality elsewhere. The missionary effort to close the gap that Africa was presumed to represent, from their missionary standpoint resulted in the establishment of a church and histories which engaged in a monologue with local history ignored. The previous president of South Africa Thabo Mbeki argued from his address to the University of Makerere recently that 'it is not possible for Africa properly to understand the present reality without a proper assessment of what might seem in terms of chronology, to be a dead past that we must discount. The hard truth is that absolutely each of our days is weighed down by the heavy burden of the past' (Mbeki 2011: unpublished lecture).

Years later after the church has been placed in the hands of Africans one still finds the inherited missionary attitudes continuing to be alive and well. George Tinker (1993:3) argues that congregations remain loyal: not only to the denominations but also to the same missionary theology that was brought to them. This sharply demonstrates that the process of internalisation has involved a larger illusion of inferiority and idealization of the dominant culture and religion. This undoubtedly resulted in a praxis of self hatred.

The same can be said of the African context, referring to the extinguishing of the lantern by Africans themselves as they continue to draw on a historical framework obtained from an external source and passionately perpetuate western attitudes and traditions. The continual use of European methodologies in our historiography suggest that Africans have indeed internalized the idealization of things and values that are European and immersed themselves in an irredeemable self-hatred that has paralysed them and stands in the way of recovery and regeneration in the new millennium. If regeneration and recovery are to be effected, then they must be based on the foundation of African history and cultural values.

Jafta's (2004 unpublished notes) assertion is that history authors sometimes write to please a certain group and sometimes to lay the foundation for the future. Some of the questions we must raise should be: who feeds the historian with information? Who are the benefactors of this history? What role does hegemony play in the writing of history? In this case those wielding the power of the pen tend to dominate the history discourse.

The praxis alluded to above forms part of a larger problem where those with the experience of oppression exhibit the tendency to internalize their subjugation as they begin to believe the preconceptions and stereotypes held about them by their oppressors. These beliefs surely stunt their advancement and regeneration and further entrench them in their defeat. However, it is wise also to remember that "the scorching sun never rubs off the stripes of a zebra" (Khan & Khan 2004:61): the truth is that the religious and cultural history of Africa cannot be erased by campaigners of other religious and historical traditions that lay claim to global domination. Mahatma Gandhi once said: 'I do not want my house to be walled in all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any'. His statement clearly provides Africa with the opportunity to write her own history in an authentic way and avoid living in other people's expectations and dreams as this will lead to drinking from 'Borrowed/begged water that never quenches thirst'.

African history has furnished answers to the questions relative to how best people should interact with their environment, both physical and spiritual. This is basically to ensure harmony and equilibrium together with a deep sense of understanding reality. In doing further research one discovers that for a society to be recognised by the west, it has to have a written history. This has clearly been the case with some countries struggling to gain their autonomy from either their conquerors or those dominating their space. A good example is South Sudan which only came to be recognised on the basis that its citizens were until recently obliged to engage in a civil war to emancipate themselves. This plainly tells one that lack of participation in history writing renders that society non-existent. In the religious context one finds the

same parallels existing due to the fact that African Traditional Religion did not have anything documented to warrant it a legitimate religion. The historical reality is merely that through African Traditional Religion Christianity became acceptable to the African masses. Some of the basic concepts in Christianity were already being practised in the African world view and as a result nothing was new or foreign to Africans except the westernization and Europeanization of Christianity, which has today made it mainstream. I repeat: tracing back some of these community based concepts, one finds that nothing is foreign about them from the historical point of view. These are concepts such as love your neighbour as yourself, humanness, sharing and so on. Pre-colonial Africans have practised these concepts especially by accommodating strangers in their houses and midst. It was impractical for them to turn the stranger away and not offer her or him some water to drink. The Early Church History books trace the birth of this religion (Christianity) to Africa. However, owing to the way it was presented to Africans by the missionaries when it came back from Europe it was totally westernized and created conflict among the religions that were in existence (Shaw-Taylor unpublished lecture October 2011). The fate of African history cannot be allowed to be determined by the other as it is an inescapable responsibility of the Africans to derive meaning and significance from their inherited tradition and take charge of their own destinies by reconstructing value systems for their societies.

History from the African perspective as in other parts of the world should seek to undertake the ultimate quest in life that is the ultimate meaning of human existence, in order that the latter may be more comprehensible, tolerable and endurable. In this instance, historical epistemology from the African context does not seek to challenge or question the validity of the ultimate but ensures freedom of expression with the underlying principle that 'truth is like a baobab tree, and no one person's arms can go around it. Therefore in terms of the historical view, the truth is not a monopoly of any single individual; it is a universal phenomenon that must be shared' (Sackey 1993: 124). Africa houses diversified ethnic groups with traditional cultures which differ considerably from each other. Each ethnic group practices a religion which is bound by a particular historical experience and traditions and is therefore restricted to the people among whom it has evolved. African Traditional Religion does not

derive from a universal founder or propaganda machinery: it consists of the beliefs of the people which evolve over time and have not been written down nor codified into a coherent doctrine: neither do they exist in a chaotic state. On the contrary, African religious beliefs and practices have been systematically embodied in the form of myths, proverbs, gestures, art, music and dance; these have also been transmitted orally from older to younger generations.

At the same time it is necessary to view ecclesiastical history especially in the South African context from the perspective of a hermeneutic of suspicion. The writers of this history (such as Oosthuizen, Sundkler, Daneel and others) were in essence looking at themselves when they decided to put down the events which involved them and the world view which they represented. Earlier in this lecture I indicated that history in certain instances was written from the hegemonic perspective with its beneficiaries in mind. One cannot help but also raise concern over the lack of any sufficient documented history of South Africa before colonialism. The absence of the written history of the African Initiated Churches (AICs), recorded by its original founders, has rendered these denominations apparently less authentic as opposed to the mainline churches which possessed their written history penned by their own members. I am not implying that the former do not have written history. Reading the history of these denominations in certain instances leads to a confused state of mind. For me, the founding of these denominations does not warrant their being considered break-away churches as the trend followed in using this term typically reflects that of the 16th century Reformation. From the name 'Independent' it is easy to conclude that somehow there was either a parent or a guardian who gave some guidance to these denominations (Jafta 2004 unpublished). A good Church Historian will be able to tell that missionaries take credit for the existence of the AICs, although she or he is well aware of the experience and pangs of conscience the founders of these churches have gone through. However, this does not seem to be the case for those who wrote the history of the AICs because the authors were either not founders or writing from different ontological perspective. In this case the identity of the writers did not reflect that of the people affected by the events. What I am trying to say, is that AICs are simply churches born in Africa, and their founding should not be seen to reflect the events of the 16th century Reformation in Europe by the

Protestants. In some cases there is a tendency to argue that history tends to repeat itself. The instance of the AICs, however, does not suggest the latter but rather emphasises that it should be appreciated that in some ways the indigenous people were conscious of their experiences and environment politically, socially, religiously as well as economically, which was the case with the Reformation. The lack of appreciation is mainly because Africa was and is perceived as a continent which cannot possess a history which contributes to the global consciousness. Much of the history of the AICs has been obtained orally and was later translated into writing by those who share the same experience as the proponents (except in the case of Shembe). In other words the African Independent Churches have not participated in the writing of their own history. How then do Africans convince themselves that the formation of the AICs does not constitute a schism and that they are legitimate churches founded on authentic grounds of culture and identity? The answer to this question implies that Africans themselves could not provide the mechanisms and tools to justify the legitimacy and authenticity of the AICs as denominations with a well grounded history. As a result foreign influences seem to play a dominant role which affects the direction and determines the destiny of history from the African context.

Williams (1978: 83) points out emphatically that with or without Christianity there has always been a sense of understanding of African epistemology amongst indigenous people. He does, however, not indicate by what form of transmission that historical epistemology has been carried out. All he could come up with is the notion that indigenous people resisted Christianity. The one thing which Williams did not consider was the fact that rejection of Christianity by Africans was in itself the recognition of their own cultural embodiment which involves their experiences as well. This rejection in its pure form signified the restoration of Traditional Religion and of the meaning of the African life. It was after the cattle killing in 1856 -57 that the sense of nationalism emerged. Nationalism emerged simply because many Africans began to realise that they needed a sense of belonging, especially as they were threatened at different levels and in various ways. History has proven over the years that a sense of belonging is part of the ontology of everyone. My response to this issue is in essence a way to seek cohesion, consolidation and values. It is also a

defensive mechanism against the intangible (rites and customs) as well as the tangible (material as well as land).

4. Proposal

I would like to propose 3 steps for contemporary Church Historians who stems mainly from the African context: firstly, that we need to write what we know and understand. Secondly while doing so we also need to remember at the back of our minds that this should be a history that is not influenced by the current hegemonic western view. I contend, thirdly, that it is imperative to avoid drinking the borrowed water that will not quench our thirst but rather to look at drinking from our own wells. I suggest the way in which we can write our history should pay attention to what, I think, may accord us the process, namely consciousness.

Earlier in this lecture I mentioned Tiyo Soga and Steve Biko as thinkers who voiced the need for people to be conscious of themselves and their environment. People define consciousness in many different ways, but for this lecture I would like us to focus on the mental attitude. In simple terms my definition of consciousness refers to any person who is able to hold his or her head up in defiance as opposed to willingly surrendering his/her soul. This is an awareness by human beings of rallying together with the human species against the causes of their socio, political, economic and religious environment, functioning as a unit to free themselves from the shackles of being dominated or oppressed. In today's terms, at least to people outside academia, consciousness will mean emancipation of the members of the collective who through their experience were not allowed space to express and explore what makes them human. With consciousness in our mind it becomes important always to know who we are writing our history for and how it will benefit those contributing to it without prejudicing anyone. As intimated by Mahatma Gandhi we should leave our windows opened. African history should contribute to that of the world without anyone being left out of the picture. As Fanon (2001: 198) observes 'the liberation of the nation is one thing; the methods and popular content of the fight are another'. Being free does not basically mean we are conscious of what is around us, as these are not the same.

The question which today's history scholars should be asking is: what should Africa do to determine her destiny in the contemporary world? The problem that faces many academics within the African context is simply that most of them are reluctant to face the challenges head on. For me it is important that scholars should have the courage to face the current challenges which pose a threat to our society, calling a spade a spade without being apologetic. This is a sentiment uttered by Xavier Renou in his book *'A Major Obstacle to African Unity: the New Franco-American Cold War on the (African) continent'*. History from the African context has demonstrated that over the years the political landscape has at the same time influenced how history is written. One may cite a few examples such as the developments in Cote d'Ivoire and Libya which took place last year. Africa was not allowed or afforded a chance to offer her own solutions to her problems. In this case non African countries were apparently mandated by the United Nations Security Council, in spite of African opinion, to remove the sitting governments by force and thus effect regime change, in the interests of the Western powers (Mbeki: unpublished lecture). About twenty years ago this would have characterised intervention with full understanding of imperialist power. It is these developments which, according to Xavier Renou, the African Academics are reluctant and afraid boldly and accurately to write about in the history books.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I do not have to be apologetic as both a historian and an academic to write history from my background while feeling sorry about how the opposite side may feel. It is such experience, conscience and identity which also crafts our epistemology and determines our destiny. Like Oduyoye we should stop accepting the standards set for us without our participation. May be it is time that scholars from Africa should begin to ask a question like: how many theses even on Africa written by people from other continents are sent to African scholars to evaluate?

In Fanon's words:

'If a man is known by his acts, then we will say that the most urgent thing today for the intellectual is to build up his nation. If this building up is true, that is to say if it interprets the manifest will of the people and reveals the eager African peoples, then the building of a nation is of necessity accompanied by the discovery and encouragement of universalising values. Far from keeping aloof from other nations, therefore, it is national liberation which leads the nation to play its part on the stage of history. It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows. And this two-fold emerging is ultimately the source of culture'.

It is time we drink from our own wells and quench our thirst.

Thank you.

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